

HOW A UGANDAN REFUGEE HELPED TURN TRASH IN THE GALAPAGOS INTO ART

BY [MONA GABLE](#)

Sarah Akot, a Ugandan paper beadmaker, visited the Galapagos in 2011 and left a creative legacy for local craftspeople.

The [Galapagos](#) may be known, rightfully, for its striking array of wildlife found nowhere else in the world. And, to be sure, you won't see a blue-footed booby or a ruby-throated frigate anywhere but here. But the "Enchanted Islands," as Charles Darwin dubbed the isolated archipelago 600 miles from the coast of Ecuador, are also home to another rare sight: an abundance of art made from trash.

Walk into a shop on Puerto Ayora, the bustling port town on the island of Santa Cruz, and you'll encounter all manner of beautiful glassware, paper beaded necklaces, bracelets, and earrings made by local artisans. And all fashioned from mounds of recycled paper and glass, collected from islanders and tourists alike.

The idea to turn trash into art evolved three years ago, when Lindblad Expeditions launched a program in the Galapagos called the [Lindblad National Geographic Artisan Fund](#). After anchoring in the pristine islands for decades, the [travel](#) company wanted to solve two interrelated problems: reduce the amount of trash and help artists and craftspeople make a living from tourism. Because most of the Galapagos is protected national parkland, recycling was already



required by law. But many artisans relied on materials shipped from Ecuador, which is extremely expensive.

In April 2011, Lindblad teamed with Paper to Pearls, a microenterprise project for disadvantaged women, and brought Sarah Akot, a Ugandan paper beadmaker, to the Galapagos. As the head of a women's beading cooperative in a refugee camp, Akot had never left northern Uganda, much less traipsed across the seas to a chain of volcanic islands straddling the Equator. After she arrived, she called a friend to report that the ocean was not only bigger than Uganda, but Africa, too.

Akot spent three days each on Santa Cruz and Isabela islands, teaching locals the art of paper beadmaking and assembling jewelry. Many of the community women were married to fishermen, and wanted to help support their families. Although the charismatic Ugandan teacher spoke English, most of her students didn't. So training manuals were created in Spanish. The [Artisan Fund](#) also provided bundles of paper--calendars, magazines, posters from Lindblad's fleet of ships--for rolling the beads. Using paper, scissors, rulers and glue, Akot showed them how to turn the beads into an item of high-quality jewelry. By the end of the workshop, the students had a piece of handmade jewelry to take home. But more than that, they'd experienced a cross-cultural exchange spanning art, conservation, and commerce. On Akot's last day, the students gave her gifts, and she danced to a CD of traditional northern Ugandan music.

They never saw their mentor again. In early 2013, Akot died of unknown causes in a hospital in Uganda. Yet, her legacy in Galapagos lives on. You can find recycled paper jewelry in nearly 60% of the shops on Santa Cruz and Isabela. More than a dozen local women are making an income selling their jewelry, including at two galleries devoted to recycled handcrafts and art on Lindblad's ships. Last year the Endeavor, Islander and the Explorer generated \$16,000 in sales of paper jewelry from travelers--a percentage of which is recycled into the Artisan Fund for artists.

The recycling project has also grown. Last year, renowned Hudson Valley glassblower John Gilvey taught islanders how to make objects using recycled glass, and New York artist Jennifer Rutheny did a series of [metal jewelry workshops](#) in the Galapagos.

Last winter, I visited a few of the artisans at their studios in Puerto Ayora. Sara Fiallos, a 51-year-old beader, works out of her cheerful stucco home in a large, airy space that spans the kitchen and living room. Her jewelry is sold on Lindblad's ships. On a table were bowls of beads and tidily arranged necklaces in single colors like sky blue. They looked as shiny as porcelain. Fiallos likes monochromatic designs because she thinks they're more elegant. There were also beads in plastic bags, carefully sorted by color and size. On another table were supplies: nails, toothpicks, posters, and long strips of paper for making the "pearls." As we talked in Spanish, her husband Ricardo sat at a computer while a small white fluffy dog padded about on the white tile.



Sara Fiallos. Photo by Mona Gable

Dressed in a hot pink blouse and blue slacks, her sleek black hair pulled back with a gold clip, the quiet artisan said it usually takes her about a week to finish a piece of jewelry. Once she chooses the design and the colors, she rolls the cut paper triangles into beads, slathers them with varnish, and then hangs the jewelry on a wooden rod outside to dry. Two young women help her roll the paper beads. She loves the process so much she taught a friend to bead.

Daysi Patino's "studio" was a tiny cinderblock room off an alley in town. It was stacked floor to ceiling with shelves, old [travel catalogs](#) ("New Expeditions for 2013"), dozens of baby jars bursting with beads, empty milk cartons, and cardboard boxes filled with magazines. A Trader Joe's bag sat on the floor. Patino, a confident woman of 47 with black frizzy hair, had on jeans, an aqua T-shirt, and tennis shoes. Her playful, multi-colored jewelry adorned her arms and neck.

Patino sells her work not only through Lindblad, but in a half dozen shops on Puerto Ayora and San Cristobal. Although she had an office job with the [Tourist Ministry](#), she took the jewelry and glass workshops because she wanted to work for herself. She already made plastic beaded necklaces, so paper beading was easy. She earns at least \$400 a month and says her bracelets sell the best. She fondly remembers the Ugandan woman--who "came from a country so far away"--to teach her and other people in the Galapagos a valuable trade. Akot's story of being a refugee and how beading had helped her survive deeply resonated. "She translated how important it was to her," said Patino. "She was a natural teacher."



